



# OJJDP FACT SHEET

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## Healthy Families America

by Nels Ericson

An estimated 3 million cases of suspected child abuse and neglect are reported to State and local Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies every year, and more than 1 million of those reports are confirmed. Recent data show that three or four children die every day from abuse and neglect in the United States, but more than half of those fatalities do not show up on CPS agency records.

Research has shown that child abuse victims are more likely to underachieve in school and become involved in juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, and adult criminality. According to a report released by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, “the earliest years of a child’s life are society’s most neglected . . . yet new evidence confirms that these years lay the foundation for all that follows.”<sup>1</sup>

### Meeting At-Risk Families’ Needs

In 1992, Prevent Child Abuse America, in partnership with Ronald McDonald House Charities and with financial support from the Freddie Mac Foundation, launched Healthy Families America, a voluntary home visitation program designed to improve the parenting skills of parents with newborns or small children, encourage child health and development, and prevent child abuse and neglect. Prevent Child Abuse America (formerly the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse) is the Nation’s leading child abuse prevention organization. Healthy Families America services include talking with parents to determine what resources and services best meet their needs, providing information on how to care for a new baby, offering positive parenting tips, and assisting new parents with stress management. More than 90 percent of families offered Healthy Families America services choose to participate in the program.

Today, Healthy Families America services are available in more than 420 communities in 39 States, Washington, DC, and

Canada. Although Healthy Families America sites are administered through a variety of organizational structures, in many States, local and statewide networks have emerged as the most efficient infrastructure to support the growing number of sites. Statewide systems facilitate communication among individual Healthy Families America sites, provide training and supervision for home visitors and other workers, establish quality assurance mechanisms, and secure ongoing funding.

### Critical Elements

All Healthy Families America sites must adhere to a set of critical program elements based on current knowledge (suggested by repeated evaluations of early intervention programs for new parents) about what constitutes a successful home visitation program. These elements provide each site flexibility to adapt its program design to local needs and conditions and innovate where possible. Healthy Family America’s credentialing process uses the elements to measure and improve the quality of services each site offers. The critical elements include:

#### *Initiating services prenatally or at birth*

- ◆ The sites use a standardized assessment tool to systematically identify families who most need services. The tool assesses risk factors (such as social isolation, substance abuse, parental history of abuse in childhood) associated with increased risk of child maltreatment or other poor outcomes for children.
- ◆ Families voluntarily participate in the program. Caseworkers use positive outreach efforts to build family trust in the caseworker and the program.

#### *Providing services*

- ◆ Home visitors offer participating families long-term services (usually 3 to 5 years), beginning intensively (at least one visit per week), and use well-defined criteria for determining whether the intensity of service should be increased or decreased.

<sup>1</sup> Carnegie Corporation of New York. 1994. *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

- ◆ Services are culturally sensitive, and materials used reflect the diversity of the population served.
- ◆ Comprehensive services support parents, parent-child interaction, and child development.
- ◆ Families are linked to a medical provider (for timely inoculations and well-child care) and, if needed, financial assistance, food and housing assistance programs, school readiness programs, child care, job training programs, family support centers, substance abuse treatment programs, and domestic violence shelters.
- ◆ Home visitors carry a light caseload so they have sufficient time to spend with each family; the caseload varies from fewer than 10 families to as many as 15 families.

#### *Selecting and training home visitors*

- ◆ Caseworkers are chosen based on their ability to establish trusting relationships with participating families.
- ◆ All service providers receive basic training in cultural competency, substance abuse, child abuse reporting, domestic violence, drug-exposed infants, and available services in their community.
- ◆ Service providers are trained so they understand the components of family assessment and home visitation.

### **Program Successes**

Prevention programs such as Healthy Families America have been shown to strengthen the parent-child relationship and improve parents' ability to meet the needs of their children. Healthy Families America programs across the country have produced the following results:

- ◆ **Linking children to medical services.** In Oregon, the 1997 statewide immunization rate for 2-year-olds was 73 percent, while the immunization rate for children participating in the Healthy Families America program was 97 percent. In Florida, 100 percent of 2-year-olds and 70 percent of 16- to 23-month-olds in the Healthy Families America program were fully immunized and current with well-baby checkups.

- ◆ **Helping mothers seek prenatal care.** In Oregon, 94 percent of participating mothers sought early and comprehensive prenatal care for second pregnancies, compared with 61 percent for their first pregnancies.
- ◆ **Helping prevent child abuse.** Some studies suggest that families enrolled in Healthy Families America are one-third to one-half as likely to maltreat their children as comparable families not enrolled in the program.
- ◆ **Providing effective services to parents.** In New Jersey, 98 percent of Healthy Families America participants were satisfied with the services they received, and 100 percent found their home visitors to be supportive. In Virginia, 95 percent of participants said the program improved their parenting.

Programs such as Healthy Families America that work with parents directly after their child's birth stand the best chance of reducing the risk of child abuse because most physical abuse and neglect occur among children younger than 2, 44 percent of fatalities due to child maltreatment occur before the child's first birthday, and the most critical brain development occurs during the first few years of life. By focusing on a child's early years, home visitors help new parents provide children with experiences that stimulate healthy brain development.

### **For Further Information**

For more information on Healthy Families America and child abuse prevention, contact Prevent Child Abuse America, 200 South Michigan Avenue, 17th Floor, Chicago, IL 60604-2404; 800-555-3748, 312-663-3520, 312-939-8962 (fax), [www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org](http://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org), and [www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org).

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